A CONVERSATION WITH DR. ROBERT N. BELLAH

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ANNOUNCER: The National Council of Churches presents: "A Conversation with Dr. Robert N. Bellah." Speaking with Dr. Bellah is Edwin Newman, NBC News Correspondent. Mr. Newman.

MR. NEWMAN: I'd like to sketch in a little of Professor Bellah's career. He is a Professor of Sociology and Comparative Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, where is also the former chairman and now the vice-chairman of the Center for Japanese and Korean Studies. He has also taught at Harvard and Princeton. He has been associated with the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford and the Center for Middle East Studies at Harvard and with the Center for Islamic Studies at McGill University. His book, *The Broken Covenant*, won an award from the American Sociological Association in 1976.

DR. Bellah, in that book, *The Broken Covenant*, you have a quotation – among other quotations – from Montesquieu: "A republic will stand as long as its citizens love it." Do American citizens love their republic?

DR. BELLAH: I think that's a very interesting question. My own feeling is that most Americans do love the republic in which they live even though they are somewhat discouraged and even disillusioned with the political process. I think there is a reservoir of love and concern which perhaps is going to serve us in good stead in the long run.

MR. NEWMAN: Well, if you say it's going to serve us in good stead, that rather implies that you think it will have to serve us in good stead. Do you anticipate difficulties and strains? Unusual difficulties and strains I should say.

DR. BELLAH: Yes, of course. We have always had problems, as any major society has, but in some respects we lived for a long time in America in rather artificially benign state cut off from the rest of the world by the oceans and so on. The twentieth century has seen us move into serious problems at home and in our relations with the rest of the world, and my own sense is that from here on out for the rest of the century the problems are only going to get much worse, and that the republican institutions, the free institutions, or our society will be placed under enormous strain and that there will even be severe temptations at points to opt for authoritarian rule.

MR. NEWMAN: Why do you foresee this happening?

DR. BELLAH: Well, that raises so many issues it's hard to know where to begin. But I think …

MR. NEWMAN: May I suggest a place to begin? If the life of a republic depends upon its citizens loving it, why should any American citizens not love their republic? Why would they have ceased to do so?

DR. BELLAH: Well, of course the question would be posed differently for different groups. There are people for a long time in our society that have not in a sense gotten a fair break. There are others that felt very much identified with the society and who have begun to wonder if they really carry any weight any more. There are others whose ideas of what kind of society we live in have been called into question by the immense social changes, particularly since the second world war. So there are a variety of sources of doubt and confusion in people's minds. But to me

perhaps the central cause of strain in our society is that I think we really are moving into a period when limits are coming to bear in a new way. We've solved most of our problems before by growth, by providing more, and particularly more material things. We've assumed that the solution to all our moral difficulties is to make the people that have been on the outside participate in the cornucopia of material well-being. I don't think that can be the solution of our problems anymore and that raises some very central questions about our economic system and how that ties into the economy and the cultural meanings of what our society is all about.

MR. NEWMAN: You're saying then that the love citizens have for the republic depends upon the material success of that republic?

MR. BELLAH: Well, I hope not. You know Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote that great book, *Democracy in America*, felt that Americans did love their freedom and their republic in part because of their material success. But late in his life he said, "I don't believe that free institutions will ever survive if the love for them is based primarily material reward." And particularly in a period when the material is going to be problematic why we need to think about the love of our free institutions and the way to make them more viable that will attract people for reasons other than purely material self-interest.

MR. NEWMAN: If I have this right – and you'll tell me if I haven't, Mr. Bellah – what you're suggesting is that external factors, physical factors, are threatening the future of the republic rather than any lack of belief in say the American system, in the Constitution.

DR. BELLAH: Well, I think we have – because of the period of enormous material growth we've managed for a long time to have our cake and eat it too. We could have very high moral ideals and believe in equality and freedom and justice at the same time that we were all going get a little more money every year and everybody's income was going to rise and we were going to have a longer vacation and all of that. Well, we may just be faced with a situation in which we can't have as much of the second, or we'll have to think about the way in which the distribution of the goods is organized in a society because the total package is not going to grow at the same rate. And that may call into question our ideals in relation to our material rewards. And yet the idea has been generally accepted I think that the success of this country, the whole concept of the United States, rests on ideas rather than on physical wealth, rather than on the fact that this was a good part with vast natural resources. That it rests on ideas that were written into the Declaration of Independence, written into the Constitution.

MR. NEWMAN: It rather sounds from what you're saying as though that really didn't have very much to do with it.

DR. BELLAH: No, no. I don't want to appear to take a one-sided view. I think that the ideas have been terribly important and the degree to which Americans have actually participated in their public life at the local level and had the experience of running a free society, the whole importance of voluntary association in our life, these have created experiences of enjoyment of what it is to live in a free society that are quite independent of the question of material rewards and have made those promises of the Declaration of Independence real – not for all Americans,

but for many of them. So I think it's a balance though and I think the strain rises when you can't have it all – when there must be some hard decisions made about the material side of life.

MR. NEWMAN: Well, to what extent does the survival of this country as we know it depend upon what you have called civil religion? Is that part of love for the republic?

DR. BELLAH: Well, I think traditionally it certainly has been. Of course, the idea of civil religion is a little bit complicated, but to try to express it in simple words, it simply means the notion that Americans have had really since their first colonialists, but also in the founders of our republic, that somehow our mission here stands under divine judgment and is related to the highest kinds of religious ideals. We've tended to express that in language that includes people of varying denominations so that the religious language in the Declaration of Independence, for example, is very general, but the notion that the nation is under God is a very old and important notion in our republic. It provides some of the understanding and commitment, I think, of many Americans about the society in which they live. And if that weren't there at all, again I think it would be much more difficult.

MR. NEWMAN: We are speaking there, Mr. Bellah, about the idea that this country was chosen by God? That it was peculiarly blessed by God?

DR. BELLAH: Well, there has certainly been an element of that, which is of course highly dangerous. Abraham Lincoln said we are an *almost* chosen people, perhaps to give an element of qualification to our tendency to believe too readily that we are specially favored. But I think the notion that we have been in terms of human history a rather a rather fortunate society as societies go can be religiously interpreted, and has been I think by the most sensitive political and religious leaders, to mean that there are special burdens on us and special demands on us to live up to expectations rather than simply affirming us as we are as specially good people.

MR. NEWMAN: This is the idea of the United States as the last good hope of man?

DR. BELLAH: Well, it seems to me that free institutions are in trouble all over the world. We have had the Carter Administration's emphasis on human rights which I happen to think – though you can interpret particular details – has been a healthy thing in the world. But the strongest lesson we have for the world is our own society working. As long as we give an example of a free society which includes an enormous variety of people of all colors and religions and backgrounds actually operating with some decency towards most of our citizens and an effort to do the right thing toward the people that haven't been well treated before, and do it not through authoritarianism but through public participation, I think that brings hope everywhere in the world, even to the parts of the world which criticize us most harshly. So from that point of view, keeping the American project alive is not just for ourselves – it is really for the world.

MR. NEWMAN: Suppose the idea came about that we were not a chosen people. Suppose that objective conditions indicated that we were not a chosen people. Suppose we had gasoline rationing. Would that affect the general attitudes of Americans, do you think, to the republic?

DR. BELLAH: It seems to be that if you take the great example of the chosen people, namely the Jews, that they certainly have been faced with enormous problems and difficulties and kept their sense of their own mission, so I hope that that sense of special mission does not depend on everything always being ideal in terms of our material life. No, I would hope that our vision of ourselves could actually be deepened as we face challenges we haven't faced before.

MR. NEWMAN: What I was wondering about here is if there are two ways of being chosen. One to be chosen to do great things and do difficult things, and the other probably is to be chosen to receive great things and be greatly blessed.

DR. BELLAH: What you're finding is some conflict between these two. And what worries you for the rest of the century is which one is going to prevail.

MR. NEWMAN: Yes.

DR. BELLAH: Particularly to the people whose commitment to the society is primarily in terms of payoff at a rather narrow personal level. Will they, when the pressures get rough, opt for somebody to take care of them, some kind of authoritarian boss?

MR. NEWMAN: What has to be done, then, Mr. Bellah, to lead people to believe, as I gather you would like them to believe, that being a chosen people means being chosen to do great deeds and take on onerous tasks rather than simply to receive or to take a share of what you call a cornucopia?

DR. BELLAH: Well, part of it is to keep alive the best of our own tradition, to make that tradition continue effective in our public life and that is a task you and I both have, I think, as communicators in the mass media, in the educational world, to make those earlier experiences vital, to apply them to our present so that the best of our heritage is available. But it also requires political leadership, the notion of a teaching political leader like Jefferson and Lincoln were, teachers of what it was to be citizens of a republic. It's hard to see people like that today. I think we've had some of them. But we need people like that. We also need the average citizen who takes the initiative to involve him or herself in public life and therefore express what it means to love the republic through action rather than just repeating some formulas.

MR. NEWMAN: Who was the last teaching leader we had in the present?

DR. BELLAH: Well, I think the last teaching leader we had in our recent history was Martin Luther King. Of course he did not run for public office but he became a public figure who I think interpreted our deepest symbols – symbols of what it was to be an American in ways that could include a larger part of our population – black Americans – who really had not been treated decently for most of our history. And he articulated those symbols in ways that most white Americans, I think, could understand, internalize, make part of themselves. He was a great teacher of our republic.

MR. NEWMAN: Is it possible to have a teaching leader in political office now?

DR. BELLAH: Well, it's difficult. The process of going through getting elected, getting nominated and all of that. But I think it's not impossible. I frankly had hoped that Mr. Carter would be more of a teaching president than he's turned out to be, although I don't think the story is all in on that.

MR. NEWMAN: Now it is difficult for a politician, a president to be what you call a teaching leader unless he's an extremely successful politician.

DR. BELLAH: Yes, he has to be a successful politician and that casts some doubt on his role as a teacher.

MR. NEWMAN: Do you think that somebody as – I shouldn't say as aggressively religious as Mr. Carter – but someone as outwardly religious and undoubtedly inwardly religious as well, but somebody who is clearly defined as a religious person, carries any kind of advantage to the presidency then?

DR. BELLAH: I think he can because I think some very basic religious symbolism is still alive in a large part of the American people. It's probably underestimated by what Peter Berger calls the covenant of elite including university professors and the mass media people who are sometimes out of touch with the ordinary American. There still is a great deal of deep religious faith in this country and a political leader who can articulate that and perhaps relate it practically to the problem America faces in the world I think could be very important. That requires of course a vision of what we ought to be now and what we ought to be doing now. And that is what is a little hard to find in the present political scene.

MR. NEWMAN: How does one distinguish, Mr. Bellah, between civil religion and shall we call it – organized religion, traditional religion?

DR. BELLAH: I don't think they should be seen as on the same level. For one thing, in America we've never had a conflict over this issue and the churches by and large have affirmed the central symbols of the nation under God so that we haven't had two religions at war with each other. There is always the danger that if civil religion becomes an idolatry, worship of the nation, then obviously those who believe in God and not the nation cannot affirm it. But our tradition by and large has used religion to hold the nation in judgment and to assert that it should operate under higher moral standards and the churches by and large have been able to affirm that. But I think that civil religion without the presence of church religion would really be very dangerous. The autonomy, the fact that church religion has loyalty higher than the nation makes the churches at least potentially critical of our nationalism, our tendency to make absolute our national life. So it's a complicated relationship between politics and religion. Since we have no established church, but we don't like to think that politics are purely cut off from any kind of moral religious basis, we have developed what I call "civil religion," a way of linking the two that doesn't fuse either religion and politics or church and state.

MR. NEWMAN: In your book, *The Broken Covenant*, which I think you wrote in 1975, today the American civil religion is an empty and broken shell. That's to say the least an extremely pessimistic view.

DR. BELLAH: That book was written out of the very bitter moments of the winding down of the Vietnam War and the Nixon Administration, and I was reflecting on a very deep disillusionment which many Americans of various religious and political views had. I think that judgment was not wholly wrong because I think we are still suffering from the loss of confidence in our institutions all across the board. It was dramatic in the '60s. We've recovered some degree of normal, conventional life in the '70s, but I think it doesn't have much heart in it. There is still a sense that there is a great vacuum. So to recover those traditional central symbols of American life is still a project. They aren't given to us. Each generation has to make them work.

MR. NEWMAN: If there was that loss of confidence resulting from the Vietnam War, would you describe it as a justified loss of confidence?

DR. BELLAH: Well, the question is whether the symbols were wrong or whether the people who were applying those symbols were in error. My own feeling is that there is still vitality in the symbols themselves, that we have just lost the way to link them to our practical social political problems. And that's what I think we have to find again, or the life of the republic itself may be in danger.

MR. NEWMAN: Then, if I may lead you back to a question I asked before in a somewhat different connection, should we expect church religion to play a part in this or is church religion now in decline in the United States?

DR. BELLAH: Church religion is clearly a multiple and complicated matter. Some churches are growing rapidly, others are now growing very little, some may even be declining. By and large though, I think the traditional religious groups in this society are seeing a modest increase in growth and in a sense of their importance in the middle and late '70s. I certainly don't think that organized religion, or church religion, has ceased to be an important part of our life. I feel that people who are committed to religious belief provide us some reservoir of moral concern beyond that narrow private self-interest that may be very important in seeing us through the crises towards the end of this century.

MR. NEWMAN: One thing I notice as I go about this country – and this has particularly been the case since the Carter Administration came into office – is that you hear a great deal of talk about a lack of leadership in the United States. And there seems to be a feeling that leadership must come from the White House. Now obviously under the presidential system some leadership must come from the White House, but it seems to me there is very little understanding of at least the possibility that the leadership can come from a variety of sources. Now if we are to have a new vision of ourselves, and if we are to regain our confidence, basically where is this to come from? Where is the leadership so to speak to rise from?

DR. BELLAH: I think the leadership issue is very much related to the state of public consciousness, and one of the things I have not particularly liked about Mr. Carter is his tendency to stress that the American people are better than their government. My own feeling is that – in our kind of society – the government is probably a reflection of where we are and I think our sense of both putting too much demand on government and too much blame on government has to do with the self-doubts of most of us as citizens. So that if we were able to come out of this situation

and have the kind of effective leadership that we think we want – although often we undermine the very leaders that we choose – that involves the change in consciousness of who we are as citizens, not just some out-of-the-blue leader that will save us; and perhaps it involves a new dedication to the sense of the moral legitimacy of America as a society. And that again comes back to facing these problems of limits, of justice in the distribution of our goods, of the power of large, private organizations, particularly the great corporations that make effectively political decisions that influence our whole society but are not answerable to it – it means facing some very tough problems about the way our society is organized. And only some people who have some self-confidence and some vision of what it means to be a citizen of a free society in this period in history will I think be able to produce the leaders that we need.

MR. NEWMAN: Would it necessarily involve a different view of what we did in Indochina? It's often been said, particularly by foreigners but by Americans as well, that the American people have just put Vietnam out of their minds; perhaps in a way that's understandable – it's not a very pleasant thing to remember. But do you think the health of the society – the moral health, the intellectual health, depends on a more specific, open acknowledgement of that war and of our part in it?

DR. BELLAH: I think it would perhaps involve payment of reparations, which obviously will not be forthcoming. Whatever form it takes I think that to really assimilate that experience is very important for us as a people. To see what it means to give up the dreams of imperial glory, that somehow we can dictate the state of the whole world and if our will is crossed we will simply do it by military power. I think to keep that whole story in all its bitter and unpleasant side in our consciousness and work it through is important. But I also think it can be an escape because we would be in very serious difficulty even without Vietnam. The problem of the change in the whole world in terms of things like the energy crisis, the balance between rich and poor nations, which can give people like Idi Amin atom bombs before the year 2000 – we are facing desperate problems that would test any society, even without the traumatic experience we went through in Vietnam. So to see Vietnam not as something that's wholly unique and sort of a strange aberration, but really as a symptom of the fact that we have to face difficulties that try us and demand a new level of adulthood in our society that we haven't had to display before.

MR. NEWMAN: That creates a very mixed and difficult political situation, does it not, the set of circumstances you've just described?

DR. BELLAH: Yes. Because it created dismay and despair and a sense of what can we do, the problems are overwhelming. And when that kind of negativity gets too widespread in the society again there is the temptation to look to somebody who is going to promise to do it all for us. And as I say, that is the thing that worries me. If we lose our citizen consciousness and our sense of participation then we do run the risk of some kind of authoritarianism.

MR. NEWMAN: Does it also lead toward a flight towards exotic religions?

DR. BELLAH: This is part of the picture. It's a mixed story, but my own sense is that an openness toward the religious traditions of all mankind is one of the positive things in our recent experience, ability to understand religious traditions that before were seen as wholly alien. But

when the interest in say oriental religion is linked to a very kind of private withdrawal from the public sphere, it can indeed have political consequences that undermine the kind of republican consciousness we've been talking about.

MR. NEWMAN: Well, you have said that there is a new religious consciousness today. How does it manifest itself? Obviously in part through the attraction of the Eastern religions.

DR. BELLAH: We went through a great religious upheaval of sorts. Some people have called it a cultural revolution – in the late '60s and early '70s – that I think expanded the range of symbolic resources, at least that were available to educated Americans. We haven't fully assimilated that. Some of the things that have followed in the wake of that have been very troubling. But I think potentially a sense of the richness in symbolic meaning in the world that religions and art have carried could help to see us through the difficulties of the coming decades. The question is, I think, we are not going to abandon our biblical faith, Americans are not going to become Buddhists by the millions. So I think the central task for us in America is to make the traditional Western religious symbolism alive and relevant. But actually some of the interesting oriental and primitive religion has made us appreciate the biblical faith in a new and vital way.

MR. NEWMAN: But again – I'm quoting from *The Broken Covenant* – you've said the cultural vitality in America of the civil religious traditions has been waning for a long time. But could it reverse then?

DR. BELLAH: Yes. Well, again the linkage between a cultural consciousness that is primarily oriented towards the everyday world, the pragmatic, the practical, which is not very sensitive to spiritual issues, is not very interested in the imagination, has been part of a long phase of Western history in which economics and technology have been at the center. That, of course, has been exemplified very much in America with a great industrialization, technical achievements and so on. But it seems to me again as we move into a period when technology is simply not going to solve everything for us, and we have human and social challenges we may begin to see that the rational, pragmatic consciousness is not the only resource we have as human beings, and the more poetic, the more spiritual, and more religious, and more symbolic ways of thinking about reality may be more important than they have been in a long time.

MR. NEWMAN: Mr. Bellah, do you accept the argument – it's a familiar argument – that the religion that Americans came to have, indeed the religions that came to flourish in Western Europe, were religions that were peculiarly conducive to capitalism and vice versa – they fitted each other and that particularly the Protestant ethic was in a way one of the founders – I won't say founders, that's wrong – but one of the great forces that made for religion once the industrial revolution had come about?

DR. BELLAH: Well, that of course is the great argument of Max Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but I think that sometimes people forget the last paragraphs of that book in which Weber argues that capitalism is leading us into an iron cage in which there won't be any religion or spirituality at all. So that there is linkage between the early phase of modern society and Protestantism in particular. If the technical, rational, bureaucratic spirit of modern industrial society becomes all powerful it destroys even that religious tradition

which probably helped it come into existence. So I think it's an ambivalent, ambiguous relationship and there are very powerful elements in Protestantism that call into question the whole dominance of the values of industrial society. And we also have in America a very large number of Catholics who have a very rich tradition that in major ways supplements the Protestant tradition. We have a very sizable Jewish population, we have American Indians, we have Japanese Buddhists on the West Coast, we have an immense array of religious tradition to help us understand the reality in which we live.

MR. NEWMAN: Do you, as I understand it, feel that the primacy of business, the primacy of large corporations in the United States – and I suppose still more, the existence of multinational companies – is a particular threat to American society.

DR. BELLAH: I think it's the major threat because it programs us in a direction which is oriented primarily towards the tyranny of the bottom line, of making everything in terms of cost accounting, which deprives us of any standard other than the economic pay-off. What that does in terms of the organization of society, what it does to the place of values in all of life and education and even in the family I think is potentially very destructive. We've never had our economic life totally in control. We've always had other values that surround the economy, the market, with a moral framework. The dominance of an immensely powerful economic structure has really undermined that moral framework to the point where I think the economy in its present form of organization is at least potentially self-destructive.

MR. NEWMAN: Well, this brings us back to the point, I think, with which we began, which was whether the flourishing of the American republic depended on great material wealth rather than on spiritual idea. What you've just said is a rather pessimistic reading, isn't it, a rather pessimistic answer to that question. You find that the power – corporate power is increasing, you find that it is spreading. You do not find capitalism being modified by other elements, other factors in the society.

DR. BELLAH: Well, there is probably a more widespread critique of capitalism by Americans than ever before in our history, so there are some critical factors at work here. But the principle of bureaucracy is decision-making from the top down. It's not the principle of the consent of the governed. And that applies both to a governmental bureaucracy and to the immense bureaucracies of the so-called private corporations, though they really have a public function in our life. So really our task is to make these structures answerable, to involve the consent of the governed, to make democracy effective in the economic sphere. How are we going to do that I don't know. I certainly don't think state socialism of the Soviet sort is an improvement. It's actually worse, because it binds two undemocratic bureaucracies, the state and the corporations, into one. But some way of making decentralized economic structures more answerable to the people that they affect I think is on the agenda, and I think as our problems deepen and as it become clear that profit as the only criterion of decision in so much of our public life is destructive, we will simply have to work out ways of democratizing the decision making in these areas. I hope with a new consciousness of humane values and a sense of love of our fellow citizens and of people all over the world – which really means a religious sensitivity – it isn't just a practical problem. It's a problem of changing human motivation to think in ways other than narrow self-interest.

MR. NEWMAN: I'd like to pursue this point if I may, Mr. Bellah, because corporations are powerful certainly; on the other hand, by and large, people who work for large corporations do rather well materially, working conditions are usually – as these things go – good; the pay is good, partly because they have large unions to deal with the large corporations. What could happen to change this? Where would the impetus for change come from at a time when American industry as it is is having a good deal of difficulty of competing with the industry of other nations – for example the balance of trade at the moment is very heavily in deficit and has been for some years.

DR. BELLAH: Which of course is not unrelated to the growth of multinational corporations and the export of American capital and it's partly a symptom of America's enormous economic strength, it isn't simply a question of our weakness. Again, as I say, the entrenched power of the existing structures is very great and will not change readily. My feeling is though that the difficulties that are mounting create inner strains, inner contradictions, so to speak, that will lead people to ask questions about alternative forms. Robert Heilbroner has a piece in a recent *New Yorker* in which he speaks of capitalism as entering a new phase because of the very deep crisis and the deep uncertainty and lack of self-confidence even in the leadership. I don't simply see it as a question of the capitalist versus the people. That's far too simple. The people who run our economy are decent human beings. They make decisions because they have to in terms of today's structures in which they live, not because they're evil people. And I think many of those people too are going to see existing structures are simply too narrow in the kinds of decisions that they force us to make. So we can see the possibility of different ways of doing things.

MR. NEWMAN: Well, you said – here again is a quotation from *The Broken Covenant* – there's far more tension between basic American values and the capitalist economic system than is usually assumed. What specifically are the conflicts if you have a competitive system? Are you suggesting we should not have a competitive system?

DR. BELLAH: Well, the nature of our competitive system probably has to be altered to some extent. And we've operated in America with two fundamental models of what the society is. One of them is based on the idea of contract, that essentially everything is in terms of the market and you don't ever engage in a social relationship unless there is something in it for you, and you want to specify what that is and if you don't get what you expected, then forget it. You are out of it. The other notion is covenant in which we are in this thing through thick and thin, in a sense we participate in each other's lives, we care about each other, and we are in this because of values that transcend our own private interest. And I've identified the first tradition, the contract tradition with capitalism and liberalism, which in its classical meaning is really the philosophy of radical atomistic individualism; and the covenant tradition with biblical religion. Now both of them are broader than those identifications but I think if we hadn't had the covenant side, if we hadn't had a sense of something beyond the market we would not have been as relatively a decent as we have been – for all our failing. We are not like South Africa. We are trying to do something – inadequately – to get rid of the racism which is a part of our heritage. And we have moved in a positive direction. And we can't argue that we did all that simply out of self-interest. So I think of these other resources in the religious tradition, that are much older than liberal capitalism. We are going to need to get through the crisis as liberal capitalism proves unable to face the problems of our twentieth century.

MR. NEWMAN: You've spoken of the crisis. You've also used the phrase which I haven't referred to yet, which is this country's third time of trial. Now, I think before we talk about the third time of trial you'd better tell us what the first and second were.

DR. BELLAH: Well, I spoke of the first as being really that crisis of independence, of our revolutionary war, and our assumption that we could stand on our own feet and be a separate nation. The second great crisis was the Civil War, the problem of slavery. Some people have even spoken of Abraham Lincoln as our second founder, that the nation had to have a new understanding of itself. It was a very difficult period and almost destroyed us. The third time is not as easy to specify. It seems to be a protracted crisis that began sometime after the second world war and involves very deep inner problems and the new relationship of America to the world. And we haven't really begun to solve those problems yet.

MR. NEWMAN: Now, you've spoken of Lincoln I think as perhaps the only theologian among American presidents, and you found that he had introduced what you call the new theme of death, sacrifice and rebirth. But in fact that was forced upon him, was it not? It was forced upon him by circumstances, by the circumstances that brought about the Civil War. Is it your argument that it was the way he responded to it that made him this great theological leader?

DR. BELLAH: It was his interpretation of what we were going through and his acceptance of the judgment of God on the nation, that we had not lived up to our moral heritage or we would not have been in the situation we were, the calling of the nation to a new understanding of charity – that charity for all, that lack of vindictiveness of Lincoln's. It's things like that that gave us the symbolic resources to overcome that terrible trauma in a positive way it seems to me. It has of course left a lot of bitterness, but it could have been much worse if we hadn't had the kind of interpretation that Lincoln had given us.

MR. NEWMAN: In that connection then, would it have been possible to react in a different way to the war in Indochina, could the United States have come out of that in a different way.

DR. BELLAH: You know, Senator Hatfield somewhere towards the end of the war actually tried to get a day of national fasting and repentance – I think the Senate actually voted for it – which was based on a proclamation of Lincoln's, but the then president did not want that and did not sign it. We did not have a Lincoln, we did have a few people like Senator Hatfield, earlier Senator Fulbright, who did reiterate a Lincolnian understanding of judgment with respect to the Vietnam War. So we didn't entirely lack it, but as you rightly point out, since our chief magistrate – or several chief magistrates – never articulated that at the highest level, it didn't have that kind of symbolic resource that Lincoln gave us.

MR. NEWMAN: Something was said at the highest level to which you attach a great deal of significance. That was something said by President Nixon in his Second Inaugural Address. You think that demonstrated a lack of understanding of what the country was about. What was it that so distressed you about the Second Inaugural Address?

DR. BELLAH: Primarily the insistence that America has never done anything wrong. It seems to be a personal characteristic of his that he's unable to believe that he has never done anything

wrong and that the nation in which he lives has ever done anything wrong. The most interesting story about that Second Inaugural – I don't know if you remember this – but the original plans called for a choral version of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address to be part of the inaugural ceremony. Because Nixon did fancy himself a bit like Lincoln, as the misunderstood president, but at the very last minute – the day before – they canceled that out, and I believe it was because somebody read the text which stood in such sharp contrast with Nixon's text, and that it called the nation to judgment and that Nixon was saying, "We don't need judgment. We've always been perfect." And there arises out of all this a question, which is, if you think it is necessary for the American people to repent of misdeeds committed, how can this come about, particularly and if by definition the political leaders are limited by their influence and there power. Carter didn't for example get that large a vote. So that suggests another story which I'm not sure you know either, although you probably do, and that is in the prayer breakfast the Sunday after the inauguration, Carter was quoting from the seventh chapter of Second Chronicle in which is said, "Unless this people turn from its wicked ways the Lord will smite this people," and his advisors all told him he couldn't say that. He took to them a second draft and they still screamed, and finally he took it out and used that great quotation from Micah about loving mercy and walking humbly with thy God, which is one of the most classic quotes in American life, so I have no quarrel with that. But they said we cannot tell the American people that they are wicked. Lincoln could. But apparently Carter's advisors told him he couldn't.

MR. NEWMAN: It would be very difficult for somebody just taking office to do that and somebody whose achievements in the field of government, even though he had been elected President, was certainly limited at the time – which may be beside the point. But one of the great difficulties, it seems to me, President Carter has is that he doesn't speak with authority, because he doesn't have any achievements to point to.

DR. BELLAH: But I also know that he listens to too many advisors and not to his own conscience. But that is mere speculation.

MR. NEWMAN: But it just seems to me that it is extremely difficult to get the American people to talk about a single subject. They look at things in a unified way. For President Carter this seems to be extraordinarily difficult for reasons that may not have anything to do with his advisors or his desires or anything rather than the fact that he is not a very compelling public speaker.

DR. BELLAH: There's a correlation between the leaders and the people, and there's a mood in this country I think that would undermine anybody. The expectations, the blame, the uncertainty as part of our national life. If we had a public consciousness that was more articulated, that was more sure of itself in moral and religious terms, I think it would be easier for a man like Carter to respond effectively. Again, I want to stress that it's not simply a question of the man on the white horse who will give us the leadership but it's a question of the whole public life of the society. A good leader is a reflection of the society, not simply something extraneous to it.

MR. NEWMAN: You have said that the American people have to learn how to wait as well as to act. What did you mean by that?

DR. BELLAH: Well, it's that very deep pragmatism that – you know, let's stop talking and do something. And we've seen some of the examples of doing something that I think creates more problems than there were when we started the action. So I guess it's just my sense that a bit more of the contemplative life would be a good thing in a society which has always been so activistic. It's a highly evaluated thoughtfulness and reflection and theory that has always been very big on practice. Maybe our problems are so big now that there isn't very easy solution – if we just had the right person and just did the right things. We have to be receptive and open and try to understand complexities that are very, very difficult.

MR. NEWMAN: Do you attach any importance to the popularity of meditation – transcendental meditation so-called? Various other forms of meditation?

DR. BELLAH: I think again if mediation is part of a total spiritual life that includes ethical and moral concern for other human beings it can be immensely enriching. It can also – if it becomes a purely privatistic practice – be a way of withdrawing from concerns that are beyond the self. So I think it's – as most other things that are going on now – very much ambiguous.

MR. NEWMAN: You've said, well somewhat ambiguously, because you said "maybe" rather than "are" – as a journalist I know the value of the phrase "maybe" – we may be at the beginning of a new and rather different period or era. Are you talking here again about the limits of material growth as it may be available to us?

DR. BELLAH: Yes. Sydney Ahlstrom in a very important and influential book on the history of American religion spoke of the end of the 1960s as being the end of the Puritan era in America. But it does seem to me that we've seen what some people have called voluntary simplicity as an appealing mode of life that's affecting millions of people in this country; some new concern for asceticism, for the meaning of life that's not quantitative, not based on more of something or other, but on the intrinsic quality which may involve stripping down to the bare essentials. The simplicity that Henry David Thoreau spoke of and that is part of our tradition may be in the offing.

MR. NEWMAN: Then there is a rip roaring conflict in the offing, is there not? Because a very large part of the nation is clearly going in the other direction and the spread of pornography alone would suggest that, would it not?

DR. BELLAH: There is a very widespread (what you might call) culture of self-indulgence of which that is a part. Again it's ambiguous. The ability to accept parts of our personality, of our sexuality, that before were wholly denied is not a wholly negative thing. Again, it's the context in which that happens. If it becomes a purely self-indulgent avoidance of reality then it's destructive. But if it means a broader acceptance of our total humanity, as biological beings as well as cultural and psychological beings, then it can potentially be healthy.

MR. NEWMAN: We have very little time left, Mr. Bellah, but I would like to ask you a large question. Are you able to see the United States as a single whole, or is this country so varied and so big, so mixed, so various, that it's impossible to see the direction in which it's going at any given time?

DR. BELLAH: I think it's a question relative to where you are. I mean if you look at the fine-grained variety in America you'd say it's so varied there is nothing you can say about it in general. But if you look at America and Americans in the world, you can say we are a society and we are a culture. Black Americans are not Africans. Mexican-Americans are not like the inhabitants of Mexico by and large. We do imperceptibly influence everybody in the society. I hope it doesn't mean that everybody is homogenized, but we do have certain common experiences, certain common symbols, and we do still have the possibility of making it as a people.

MR. NEWMAN: Thank you very much Dr. Bellah.

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